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## **Between Street and Book: Textual Assemblages and Urban Topologies in Graphic Fiction from Brazil**

Edward King

### **Introduction**

The graphic novel form occupies an important position in the contemporary media ecology in Latin America, which is characterized by increasing fluidity between genres, producers, and consumers as well as between textual, visual, and audio media. In a study of what he calls “late book culture” in Argentina Craig Epplin examines the porous and constantly mutating boundaries between books and the “volatile media landscape” in which “the ways readers gain access to written words, the nature of the assemblages that connect books to other media and the very definition of the book seem to be in a state of flux.”<sup>1</sup> Media culture is in a period of transition between print and the digital world in which the “status of the book as a literary medium is increasingly uncertain.”<sup>2</sup> It is in this context of transition and instability that the graphic novel has risen to prominence across Latin America, receiving ever-increasing critical and popular attention. The production of visually and conceptually sophisticated book-length comics has risen dramatically across the region with areas of especially intense production emerging in Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. These publications have thrived in the cracks of the edifice that Ángel Rama once called “the lettered city,” the historical conjunction between the written word and political power in the region.<sup>3</sup> As Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Juan Poblete argue, comics in Latin America have long occupied an interstitial space between elite literary and popular visual cultures and as such became

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Epplin, *Late Book Culture in Argentina* (New York, London, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1984)

important vehicles for national-popular imaginaries throughout the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In the context of neoliberal globalization, they have become a point of contact between national-popular and “international popular” cultures.<sup>5</sup> The most popular genres of graphic novel published in the region have explored this point of contact, whether it be through popularizations of literary texts (in 2012 the Mexican comics publishers Editorial Resistencia published a graphic version of Manuel Payno’s 1891 novel *Los bandidos de Río Frio*) or the parodying of North American genre conventions (such as the satire of postmodern science fiction in *Planeta Extra* (2009) by Argentine artists Diego Agrimbau and Gabriel Ippóliti). Graphic novels also often position themselves within what Epplin describes as the “assemblages” of texts and readers produced by a rapidly changing media ecology, tapping into the networks of fans and modes of readership made possible by digital technologies.<sup>6</sup> Comics and graphic novel creators in Brazil, the focus of this chapter, have been particularly active in using the form to explore intersections between literary and popular cultures (for example. Fabio Moon and Gabriel Ba’s 2007 adaptation of the Machado de Assis short story “O alienista”) as well as between local aesthetic traditions and global genres (in *Estórias Gerais* (2007) Wellington Srbek and Flávio Colin revisit the genre conventions of the Western through a visual style reminiscent of the popular book-block printing techniques used in the northeast of the country).

Comics and graphic novels have also become more prominent objects of interest for literary and visual culture studies that are increasingly interested in the study of texts in relation to the discursive and material networks that subtend them. Yasco Horsman connects the rise of critical interest in the graphic novel form with a change in the humanities from “a

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<sup>4</sup> Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Juan Poblete, Introduction to *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics*, edited by Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Juan Poblete (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Renato Ortiz uses this term in his study of culture and globalization in *Mundialização e Cultura* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1994), 105.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Epplin, *Late Book Culture in Argentina*, 4.

study of works as self-contained texts to a (self-aware) attentiveness to their roles in various transmedial networks.”<sup>7</sup> Due to their constitutive intramedial connections between word and image coupled with their tendency to become vehicles for narratives that develop across different media platforms (which Henry Jenkins terms “transmedia narratives”), graphic fictions are laboratories for experimentations with connections between media.<sup>8</sup> Jan-Noël Thon, meanwhile, ascribes “graphic narrative” a position of central importance to the emerging discipline of what he calls “transmedial narratology,” a critical approach that has become necessary due to a “highly interconnected media landscape,” which has been shaped by “the move of media conglomerates from vertical to horizontal integration.”<sup>9</sup> The comics industries in Latin American have been quick to make use of transmedial strategies. For example, in 2015 Maurício de Sousa Produções in Brazil, the most popular creators of childrens’ comics in the region, launched a series of anime spin-offs for their teen series *Turma da Mônica Jovem*, which started in 2008.<sup>10</sup> However, most intermedial experimentations have emerged from independent collaborations, such as that between photographer Maurício Hora and André Diniz in *Morro da Favela* (2011) and the connections between electronic music, art performance, and comic books forged in Edgar Franco’s science fiction universe “Aurora pós-humana” (started in 2004 and ongoing).

The focus of this chapter are connections between street art and comic book textuality staged in the 2015 graphic novel *Zé Ninguém*, part of the ongoing street comics project “Tito na Rua” by graffiti artist Alberto Serrano. *Zé Ninguém* performs a parallel between the

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<sup>7</sup> Yasco Horsman, “The Rise of Comic Studies,” *Oxford Art Journal* 38:1 (2015), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 20. A number of prominent scholars have argued that the inclusion of both words and images is not an essential characteristic of comic book texts. Ann Miller, for instance, proposes the following influential definition: “As a visual and narrative art, [comics] produce meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text.” *Reading Bande Dessinée* (Bristol: Intellect, 2007), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Jan-Noël Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Rangel Querino, “Após mini-episódios, Cartoon lança ‘Turma da Mônica Jovem’ em versão oficial,” *RD1*, October 21, 2015, accessed October 28, 2016, <http://rd1.ig.com.br/apos-mini-episodios-cartoon-lanca-turma-da-monica-jovem-em-versao-oficial>.

assemblages that connect books to other media and an urban context that is composed of assemblages connecting local actions and events with global flows of images as well as human with nonhuman forms of agency. The book is comprised of photographs of a series of street art interventions by Serrano onto walls, doorways and underpasses in the city of Rio de Janeiro, all of which revolve around a homeless character called Zé. Serrano produced almost 150 pieces in isolated spots in and around the city, from the prosperous Leblon neighborhood in the Zona Sul to the Complexo da Maré favela in the Zona Norte. The book's photographs turn the street art pieces into panels, which are then assembled into a narrative that recounts Zé's search for his lost love Ana and his battle against a multi-national pharmaceuticals company that ruined his life. In what follows, I argue that the intermedial textuality of the project performs a topological conception of the city of Rio de Janeiro, characterized by a mutual imbrication of virtual and material space. The "Tito na Rua" project builds on the tradition of comics in Latin America to contribute to the demise of the power edifice of the lettered city by constructing a perspective on life in Rio de Janeiro that decentres human subjectivity by placing it in relation to locally- and globally-connected networks of human and nonhuman agency.

### **Urban Topologies and Comic Books**

Serrano's book *Zé Ninguém* stages a complex interface between the street comics and the textuality of the graphic novel. On the one hand, it could be argued that the book form produces an effect of containing the excesses of graffiti practice within the strictures of print. The street comics are "read" by the inhabitants of the city of Rio de Janeiro in a partial, fragmentary and non-linear way. According to this interpretation, whereas reading the street comics is embodied and carried out in movement (from the vantage point of a passing bus or while walking along a street), reading the graphic novel is disembodied and static. No one

experience of reading the street comics is the same, since there is no prescribed order and, due to the constitutive evanescence of graffiti, some works disappear soon after they are produced. The book, by contrast, imposes an order on the different image-texts, which have now been transmuted into panels. Furthermore, the book form attempts to package the transitory experience of the street comics as a commodity. To use Michel de Certeau's terms, which have been central to a number of scholars' conceptualization of the transgressive textuality of street writing, whereas graffiti is a "tactic," the book form is a "strategy."

Andrea Mubi Brighenti, in his discussion of graffiti in Italy, argues that walls in cities are "strategies" of power "aimed at controlling people and their activities by means of a control of space," which graffiti writers "subject to tactical uses."<sup>11</sup> Tactics denaturalize workings of power by drawing them into the foreground and using them against the grain of their strategic intentions. The producers and consumers of street comics exist at the level of what de Certeau describes as "the ordinary practitioners of the city [...] whose bodies follow the thick and thin of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it"; a text, that is, that "elude[s] legibility."<sup>12</sup> Following this line of argument, the genre of the graffiti book would be considered a strategy in that it encourages a controlled, detached perspective on street art and carries out a form of disciplinary domestication of street writing, reducing it from an experience or process to a form of visual art. *Zé Ninguém* recontextualizes the street works and arranges them into the grid structure of the comic form. In the process, it appeals to the "scopic drive" of the "totalizing eye" by "mak[ing] the complexity of the city readable, and immobiliz[ing] its opaque mobility in a transparent text."<sup>13</sup> By producing a book version of the Tito na Rua street comics, its makers could be accused of fetishizing the visual end product of graffiti and in the process obscuring graffiti as a practice that brings together an

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<sup>11</sup> Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," *Space and Culture* 13:3 (2010), 322-3.

<sup>12</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

assemblage of bodies and material and is part of an ongoing transformation of city space. Jeff Ferrell points out that with the growing trend of coffee table books on the work of individual artists, graffiti and street art “com[e] unstuck from their situations of production” and as a result “become free-floating signifiers, increasingly available for inclusion in advertising campaigns, public service announcements, television shows, and films.”<sup>14</sup> The production of books such as *Zé Ninguém* could be viewed as part of a wider process of gentrification in which graffiti and street art “are used as valuable markers of urban desirability and vitality.”<sup>15</sup> This process has been particularly visible in Brazil where, in March 2009, the federal government passed a law that makes street art on buildings and monuments legal if it is done with the consent of the owners.

However, a closer look at the specific textuality of the graphic novel reveals that its relationship with the street comics project is not one of containment (imposing linearity on nonlinear reading paths), stability (fixing the movement intrinsic to the reading experience of street comics) and dematerialization (from unprogrammed embodied instantiations of the narrative to the ideal text implied by the editing process). By inserting the photographs of Alberto Serrano’s street art interventions into the textual arrangements of the graphic novel the book draws attention to the topological assemblages that constitute urban space. Jason Dittmer and Alan Latham explore the connection between the production of space both on and off the comics page and examine the “symmetry” between the formal properties of graphic narrative and recent theoretical accounts of space as “not a thing but a performance” that is “emergent through the relations between different entities.”<sup>16</sup> As opposed to topographical understandings of space, grounded in the fixities of Euclidean geometry, the topological perspective is interested in figures in processes of change. In her analysis of

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<sup>14</sup> Jeff Ferrell, “Foreword: Graffiti, Street Art and the Politics of Complexity,” in *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), xxxiv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Dittmer and Alan Latham, “The Rut and the Gutter: Space and Time in Graphic Narrative,” *Cultural Geographies* 22:3 (2015), 431-2.

topological constructions of the city in Hollywood cinema, Anna Secor defines topology in contrast to a topographical understanding of space. Topographical approaches are grounded in “discrete points, regions, or territories.”<sup>17</sup> By contrast, topology “deals with surfaces and their properties, their boundedness, orientability, decomposition, and connectivity – that is, sets of properties that retain their relationships under processes of transformation” and is “defined in terms of processes and relations.”<sup>18</sup> Rob Shields argues that only topology provides an adequate vocabulary for conceptualizing the distributed and decentralized workings of power in the digital age. Conceptual commonplaces for thinking about globalization, such as David Harvey’s “time-space compression,” evoke not Euclidean space but a “rubber sheet geometry” which “is only possible in an elastic topological space.”<sup>19</sup> Dittmer and Latham argue that space in comic books is also a relational entity. It is emergent from a multiplicity of connections between pages, panels, images and words both within and outside the text. The production of space in the comic follows the “plurivectorial” process of reading, a term that comics scholar Thierry Groensteen uses to describe the way the reader is encouraged to “weave” paths through the text making connections between and within panels that are not reducible to the linear progression of the plot.<sup>20</sup> Comic texts, they argue, can be likened to the experience of art installations in that they encourage readers to think critically about space as relational and in a state of constant becoming rather than a fixed, given entity.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Secor, “Topological City,” *Urban Geography* 34:4 (2013), 431-35.

<sup>19</sup> Shields is referring to a metaphor used by anthropologist Edmund Leach in the 1960s to convey the idea that what is significant in topological understandings of space are not distances and shapes so much as what holds them together or connects them. Rob Shields, *Spatial Questions: Cultural Topologies and Social Spatialisations* (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 9. The metaphor is echoed by the image of a crumpled handkerchief in Michel Serres’ application of topological thought to understandings of time. Time according to this conception is not the linear, forward-moving time of progress but is multi-directional, bifurcating and connecting seemingly disparate points into adjacency. Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, translated by Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 60-1. The term “time-space compression” is a reference to David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 108.



The structure of *Zé Ninguém* produces the conditions for the reader to make connections between and among the panels in a way that mirrors the nonlinear reading experience of the street comics. The way the narrative overlays the physical space of the city produces a dynamic that pulls against the grain of the progressive sequentiality of the panels. Readers familiar with the streets, buildings and underpasses that form the material substrate of the images make connections between their locations. These connections set up a constant underlying tension with the narrative. Rather than constituting a fixed map of the city in a way that “immobilizes its opaque mobility” it renders it mobile by producing topological folds in urban space. By placing in sequence images that were taken at different points (and at different times) in the city, *Zé Ninguém* resembles the crumpled handkerchief, Michel Serres’ metaphor for topological space. Just as the urban text of the street comics haunts the reading experience of *Zé Ninguém*, the graphic novel haunts the streetwalker’s experience of Serrano’s street art interventions by evoking the specter of connections with multiple other points in the city.

The connections forged by the book exist in a virtual relation to the individual works. In this respect, the relation of the book to the street comics resembles that of “augmented reality” technologies that in an age of mobile computing increasingly mediate our experience of urban space. Mark Graham, Matthew Zook and Andrew Boulton use the term to conceptualize the way in which urban experience is increasingly the product of an “indeterminate, unstable, context dependent [...] material/virtual nexus mediated through technology, information and code, and enacted in specific and individualized space/time configurations.”<sup>21</sup> The connection between street-level experience and the information accessed via augmented reality technologies is recursive since this information is constantly

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Graham, Matthew Zook and Andrew Boulton, “Augmented Reality in Urban Places: Contested Content and the Duplicity of Code,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38:3 (2013), 465.

updated to reflect new experiences.<sup>22</sup> The relationship between the street comics and *Zé Ninguém* is also recursive since the graphic novel provides narrative for the individual artworks seen on the street, while the physical placement of the artworks in the street comic sets up a tension with the linear construct of the narrative by the graphic novel readers.

Rather than an anomaly, the recursive connections between Tito na Rua's street comics project and the graphic novel draw attention to the way in which much street art now exists in conjunction and dialogue with its "extensions" in other globally-networked media, in particular the internet. Increasingly, graffiti and street artists produce work to be photographed and posted online. The demands of the online platform, whether it be the photo sharing app Instagram or a street art forum, actively shape the work rather than merely providing a neutral vehicle for it. Artists increasingly produce images that are easily 'shareable' and 'tagable.' Ferrell argues that "this widespread digitization of graffiti and street art does more than record actions and images, and elongate their presence; it feeds back into the very process through which such actions and images unfold, and alters their essential meaning."<sup>23</sup> Global media networks such as Instagram not only influence the distribution of graffiti but increasingly shapes its aesthetic, complicating at its root the notion of street art as a local embodied experience. Since the works pre-empt the logic of 'tagability' the local consumption of these works at the street level is always shot through with the global. The connective logic of social media is thematized in *Zé Ninguém*. *Zé* is only reunited with Ana when a selfie of himself with a street cleaner becomes an internet meme and goes viral. In one panel, the street cleaner is shown attaching a series of hashtags to the image while in a later panel he is depicted triumphantly exclaiming that "Nossa selfie bombou!" ("Our selfie

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<sup>22</sup> In his account of "iPhone city," Benjamin Bratton uses the example of consumers who choose a restaurant via a reviews app such as Yelp and, after their meal, update the app with their own review that will in turn affect the choices of future consumers and therefore shapes their interaction with the city. Benjamin H. Bratton, "iPhone City," *Architectural Design* 79:4 (2009), 94.

<sup>23</sup> Jeff Ferrell, "Foreword: Graffiti, Street Art and the Politics of Complexity," in *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), xxxiv.

has gone wild!”).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the ecological message carried by the narrative (which will be discussed later in this chapter) functions as a metaphor for the global connectivity of the media ecology.

One of the dangers of the genre of the graffiti book is that the editing process risks effacing the multifarious materiality of the work on the street in the name of producing the ideal work. In her discussion of shifting modes of textuality from print culture to the digital age, N. Katherine Hayles argues that texts have been thought of as essentially immaterial entities in the dominant modes of textual criticism in the humanities for the last two centuries. Debates about copyright in the eighteenth century “elided or erased material and economic considerations [...] in favor of an emphasis on literary property as an intellectual construction that owed nothing to the medium in which it was embodied.”<sup>25</sup> Although this privileging of the immaterial has been repeatedly challenged by movements such as Futurism and Imagism, “the long reign of print made it easy for literary criticism to ignore the specificities of the CODEX book when discussing literary texts.”<sup>26</sup> The definition of editing complicit with this notion of the literary work is conceived as a process of convergence on the ideal work. Hans Zeller, quoted by Hayles, argues that “the editor searches in the transmitted text for the one authentic text, in comparison with which all else will be a textual corruption.”<sup>27</sup> The danger that the conception of the ideal text will be reinforced in the production of *Zé Ninguém* is all the stronger considering the ephemerality of the source material. Once the works on the street have faded or been painted over the book will survive as a lasting testimonial to their ideal incarnations. However, the way in which *Zé Ninguém* is edited places an emphasis on the materiality of both the graffiti and the graphic novel. In her introduction to the book, the editor Renata Nakano draws a parallel between how the specific

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<sup>24</sup> Alberto Serrano, *Zé Ninguém: Tito na Rua* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Janeiro, 2015), 98.

<sup>25</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MS and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Zeller quoted in N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 94.

materiality of books is frequently ignored through the persistence of certain print conventions and how familiarity renders buildings, trees and street corners invisible as we follow habitual routes through the city on a daily basis. Just as we fail to notice “as pequenas diferenças de cada dia” [“the small everyday differences”] in the city, the book becomes transparent through familiarity: “O livro é um objeto familiar a todos nós. Tão familiar que já não percebemos sua singularidade. [...] Essa familiaridade transforma o livro em algo transparente, que não se vê.” [“The book is a familiar object to all of us. So familiar that we no longer notice its singularity. [...] This familiarity transforms the book into something transparent, which we do not see.”]<sup>28</sup> Graffiti, she goes on to point out, is a practice that renders the invisible materiality of the city visible. It highlights walls the city inhabitants take for granted, draws attention to the interstitial gaps that normally go unseen: concrete motorway partitions and underpasses inhabited by the homeless.

The graphic novel *Zé Ninguém* echoes the process of rendering visible the invisible corners of the city not only through the narrative focus on the homeless, which will be discussed later in this chapter, but also through its structure. Like graffiti, the graphic novel is a medium that draws attention to its own materiality. The overt incorporation of paratextual design elements into the construction of meaning is a common strategy in graphic novel production. As Charles Hatfield explains in his discussion of the work of Chris Ware and other artists emerging from the North American indie comics scene, “many comics make it impossible to distinguish between text per se and secondary aspects such as design and the physical package, because they continually invoke said aspects to influence the reader’s participation in meaning-making.”<sup>29</sup> The graphic novel incorporates into its structure the pre-existing but equally artificial divisions in the built environment of Rio de Janeiro. The

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<sup>28</sup> Renata Nakano, *Apresentação to Zé Ninguém: Tito na Rua* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Janeiro, 2015), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), xiv.

interplay between the street art and the context of the graphic novel medium repeatedly draws attention to the role of central structuring elements such as panel and page. This is principally achieved through the inconsistency of structuring strategies and the layering of framing devices. The frames of panels are provided by the edges of city walls and doorways, the camera, ink-drawn borders on the page, and the edges of the page itself. Often, these frames are layered over one another. In the first few pages of the narrative proper, the image of the protagonist Zé is depicted on the concrete columns supporting the network of roads around the city's downtown bus station, Terminal Rodoviário Novo Rio. [see Figure 1] The images that appear in the book function through a double framing. The columns frame the individual images of Zé together with speech bubbles and thought balloons. The camera frames the column together with the surrounding environment to place Zé in the context of the bus station and to depict him together with other inhabitants of the city. Some pages capture two figures on separate columns (for example, Zé and his dog), creating the effect of two different panels in the same photograph. [see Figure 2] When Zé and his dog chase after a pigeon that has taken his last 100 reais note, the action is depicted in several stages across the same wall. The different moments in time are not separated by panel divisions in a way that evokes screen fold or tapestry techniques.<sup>30</sup> At other points, the use of panel borders is part of the street artwork itself and not just the result of its subsequent textual emplacement. These panels sometimes follow pre-existing divisions. For example, a sequence in which Zé uses a remote controlled helicopter to chase the pigeon is painted over a gateway that is divided into nine equal sections. Serrano divides these sections into three differently sized panels. [see Figure 3] Elsewhere, panel borders are painted over blank walls. However, although these walls are often whitewashed, their textures always show through the artwork in the form of

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<sup>30</sup> In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud describes both Mexican pre-Conquest codices and the Bayeux Tapestry as comics avant-la-lettre in which “there are no **panel borders** per se, but there are clear divisions of scene by **subject matter**.” Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 13. [Emphasis in the original.]

outlines of bricks or weeds breaking through walls. The intermedial connections that haunt both the street comics and the graphic novel reinforce the emphasis on materiality by highlighting the constraints that govern both media. Hatfield's focus on the influence of the physical package of comics and graphic novels on the reading experience is part of a wider turn towards the haptic in comic book scholarship. Ian Hague, for example, argues that the readers of comics and graphic novels do not interact with the texts at the level of the visual alone. Rather, the reading experience is a "performance" that involves the whole body: "The physicality of comics, their embodiment, is a crucial element of what they are and what they can be; how they do work and how they could work."<sup>31</sup> The emphasis on the textures of the surfaces visible beneath Serrano's painting encourages the reader of *Zé Ninguém* to connect this to the materiality of the graphic novel.



<sup>31</sup> Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 7.

Figure 1: Zé lost near the Terminal Rodoviário Novo Rio.  
Detail from *Zé Ninguém*, 15.



Figure 2: Zé in search of his dog.  
Detail from *Zé Ninguém*, 19.





Figure 3: Zé building a pigeon-catching robot.  
Detail from *Zé Ninguém*, 33.

The use of divisions in the physical structures of the city as panel borders within the graphic novel evokes connections between urban space and comic book form made by a number of critics. The essay collection *Comics and the City* explores various ways in which the medium reflects the context of its emergence in the urban centres of the nineteenth century. Jens Balzer argues that the amalgamation of word and image in the pioneering work of Richard F. Outcault in the “Hogan’s Alley” series (first published in *New York World* between 1895 and 1898) demand what Walter Benjamin described as the “distracted” gaze of the flâneur in the modern city. By denying primacy to either word or image, the eye of reader of Outcault’s comics is “constantly in motion”: “Their distraction is the mirror image of the



endless restlessness confronting the gaze in the modern cities.”<sup>32</sup> Ole Frahm, meanwhile, argues that early comics such as *Little Nemo* by Windsor McCay and *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman “enable an optical knowledge of the city” that sets in tension and “play” the conflicting modes of perception identified by de Certeau: the topographical perspective of the panoptic gaze and the immersion of the street walker.<sup>33</sup> For the reader of the comic page, “the gaze is forced to move and develops its own rhetoric of ambivalence between control and the loss of control.”<sup>34</sup> The “Tito na Rua” street comics project literalizes these connections between urban form and comic book form. The graphic novel *Zé Ninguém* does not carry out a topographical reading of the cityscape but immerses the reader into the complex interrelations between the material and the virtual that characterises a topological spatial logic. As one element in a wider assemblage of globally-connected media, the book not only carries out a distraction of the gaze but, as we will see in the next section, constructs a perspective on the city that displaces the centrality of human subjectivity and draws into view the networks of human and non-human agencies that determine urban life.

### Posthuman Textuality and New Visibilities

Serrano’s intermedial textual assemblage provides a useful perspective on debates about textualities of the posthuman. The “Tito na Rua” project performs a number of the processes of what Hayles describes as a “Work as Assemblage.” Hayles proposes this term as a textual corollary of the metaphor that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari construct for the trans-individual posthuman flows of desire that proliferate in machinic connections, the Body

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<sup>32</sup> Jens Balzer, “‘Hully gee, I’m a Hieroglyphe’ – Mobilizing the Gaze and the Invention of Comics in New York City, 1895,” in *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, edited by Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (New York: Continuum, 2010), 30-1.

<sup>33</sup> Ole Frahm, “Every Window Tells a Story: Remarks on the Urbanity of Early Comic Strips,” in *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, edited by Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (New York: Continuum, 2010), 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-4.

without Organs.<sup>35</sup> The Work as Assemblage is not “bound into the straightjacket of a work possessing an immaterial essence that textual criticism strives to identify and stabilize.”<sup>36</sup> Rather, it moves “fluidly among and across media” while “its components take forms distinctive to the media in which they flourish.”<sup>37</sup> The subjectivity implied by this form of textuality is not the unified, bounded and immaterial entity of humanistic traditions but one determined by material externalities. As Hayles explains the concept, “humans are conceived as mutating assemblages that can absorb a variety of entities into their environments, including both machines and organic matter.”<sup>38</sup> Debates about changing human and posthuman subjectivities tend to play themselves out around the transition from paper-based to digital writing practices. However, although the two main elements of the “Tito na Rua” assemblage are the “old” media of city walls and printed books, they stage a digital network logic both through the aesthetic of ‘tagability’ and by the way the connection between the street comics and the graphic novel repeat the dynamics of augmented reality. As Kiene Brillenburg Wurth argues, some of the most interesting posthumanist texts occupy the in-between spaces of a transitional media culture, “where visual, textual, and graphic figurations interact and resonate.”<sup>39</sup> As well as this network aesthetic, the specific properties of graffiti writing also contribute to the posthuman quality of the project’s textuality. In her study of graffiti in early modern England Juliet Fleming argues that the then common practice of writing on a wide variety of objects and surfaces – including cabinets, walls, and roof beams – challenges our dominant conceptions of what a text is. In this writing economy the material support for texts is not taken for granted and therefore “those supports remain importantly

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<sup>35</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 9.

<sup>36</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 106-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>39</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, “Posthumanities and Post-Textualities: Reading *The Raw Shark Texts* and *Women’s World*,” *Comparative Literature* 63:2 (2011), 126.

visible.”<sup>40</sup> What modern graffiti has in common with these writing practices is that it “announces itself as being written ‘on’ something.”<sup>41</sup> Fleming argues that one of the dimensions of these forms that constitutes a conceptual challenge for a contemporary readership is that they were “readily perceived by [their] practitioners as tending towards non-subjectivity – that is, towards a writing that requires no subjective position of enunciation.”<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the forms of poetry that replaced it, for which “the presupposition of an originating human presence [is] more or less coterminous with the suppression of matter,” the graffiti poetry practices explored by Fleming “call language into being as a tangible thing.”<sup>43</sup>

Modern graffiti vacillates between the assertion and suppression of a subject of enunciation. On the one hand, some contemporary graffiti practices are premised on the assertion of an individual voice or identity. The rise of graffiti auteurism has taken place in conjunction with a shift in the focus of scholarship from ethnographic studies of gang-based graffiti to aesthetic and political engagements with the work of individual artists.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, because much graffiti practice takes place at the fringes of legality, anonymity is still a prized quality among taggers and street artists. The reception of graffiti and street art in Brazil reflects this ambiguity. On the one hand, artists such as Osgemeos [The twins], the artistic name for brothers Gustavo and Otavio Pandolfo, have achieved celebrity status and international renown. Their work has become among the most important tourist attractions in São Paulo. By contrast, the tagging practice of *pixação*,<sup>45</sup> which is also associated with São Paulo, is treated as an anonymous cry of pain from the disadvantaged occupants of the city’s peripheries. The distinctiveness of *pixação* derives from a standardization of the letters,

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<sup>40</sup> Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Introduction: Sorting it all out,” in *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

<sup>45</sup> The term “pixação” is derived from the Portuguese word “piche,” meaning pitch or tar.

which are uniformly elongated with straight lines and sharp edges, giving them a “jagged look.”<sup>46</sup> This standardization reflects the fact that *pixadores* work in groups rather than as individuals. The “Tito na Rua” project also contains this ambiguity. On the one hand, Serrano has also become something of an international celebrity. Based both in Rio and New York, Serrano has appeared in newspapers speaking out against the gentrification of the Bronx and he regularly appears at public events in which he paints in front of an audience.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the “Tito na Rua” project emphasizes anonymity. The images spring up in obscure corners of the city, behind public trashcans and down dark alleyways, unpropitious platforms for a high profile artist. Anonymity is emphasized at the levels of both form and content. The fact that the artist behind the images remains anonymous for the vast majority of passers-by in Rio de Janeiro reflects the anonymity of their protagonist, Zé Ninguém. A second multi-temporal sequence that borrows from the tapestry technique described above is inscribed over a wall on one side of a main road. [see Figure 4] Four separate images of Zé being thrown out of a moving car and bouncing painfully along the road appear in and amongst the familiar sight of tags. At the moment in the narrative in which Zé is made homeless his image is presented as just one of a number of tags that exist on the cusp between visibility and invisibility. Tags paradoxically carry out an assertion of selfhood against the anonymity of the city (the signing of a name) and an effacement of this selfhood. The seriality and repetition of tags reveals this assertion of selfhood to be a performance; the name is a code designed to frustrate the state’s attempt to connect it with its actual living, prosecutable author.

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<sup>46</sup> Mario Siwi, “Pixação: The Story Behind São Paulo’s ‘Angry’ Alternative to Graffiti,” The Guardian, January 6, 2016, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jan/06/pixacao-the-story-behind-sao-paulos-angry-alternative-to-graffiti>.

<sup>47</sup> David Gonzalez, “On a Wall in the West Bronx, a Gentrification Battle Rages,” The New York Times, November 29, 2015, accessed October 28, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/nyregion/on-a-wall-in-the-west-bronx-a-gentrification-battle-rages.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/nyregion/on-a-wall-in-the-west-bronx-a-gentrification-battle-rages.html?_r=0).



Figure 4: Zé being thrown out of a moving vehicle.  
Detail from *Zé Ninguém*, 74.

However, the centrality of human subjectivity is undermined in the “Tito na Rua” project not just through the emphasis on anonymity in graffiti writing but also through the foregrounding of assemblages between networks of humans and nonhuman objects. The project presents itself as an assemblage, in the sense that Hayles uses the term, by emphasizing the materiality behind both the street interventions and the graphic novel and it draws attention to the distributed agency of these assemblages at the level of narrative. The plot of *Zé Ninguém* contains a strong ecological message that presents nature and the built urban environment as mutually entangled. The middle section of the graphic novel recounts

the back-story to Zé's homelessness and his split from his beloved Ana. "Years" previous to the frame narrative, the reader learns, Zé and Ana are living in an unspecified city in the north of Brazil. Their happy life together is interrupted when Ana gets a job working on a nature reserve with endangered species of turtles in Rio de Janeiro. Zé is teaching science at a school to fund his PhD and, since he only has one year left of his research project, decides to finish it before meeting Ana in Rio. Before this comes to pass, Zé is kidnapped by the shadowy agents of a multi-national corporation who coerce him into finishing his research in their laboratory by threatening to contaminate Ana's reserve. The corporation steals Zé's research and then dumps him, homeless and alone, on the streets of Rio. In the final third of the book, which returns to the frame of the narrative present, Ana is kidnapped by the same multi-national corporation only to finally be rescued and reunited with Zé. The effect creates a parallel between a narrative connectedness, in which the various characters are all bound together in webs of causality, and an environmental connectedness in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman environment are shown to be porous. This is emphasized through the characterization of Zé as human waste. Just as in the street comics project the human figure of Zé is merged with the physical infrastructure of the city (the images of him routinely reveal the shapes and textures of the walls and doors they are painted on), the narrative centers on the merging of human with environment. Not only is Zé discarded by the corporation like a waste product, but during his time in the city he is repeatedly placed behind trashcans alongside the unwanted dejecta of the city. Zé survives by merging with the disavowed ecosystems of waste in Rio. He inhabits the city's rubbish dumps and assembles robots and machines from the discarded matter to help him in his quests. Furthermore, as an inventor who assembles machines from waste, Zé functions as a diegetic stand-in for the graffiti artist Alberto Serrano himself who, rather than god-like author, is a connector who,

by drawing together disparate points in the city separated in space and time, lends visibility to both the material dejecta of the city and the “wasted lives”<sup>48</sup> embodied by the figure of Zé.

## Conclusion

The complex textuality of *Zé Ninguém*, and the wider “Tito na Rua” project of which it forms a part, constitutes an intervention into two of the dominant discourses surrounding street art in Brazil. One of the main arguments in favor of the decriminalization of street art in Rio in 2009, was that these works contribute to a sense of local community. Community street art projects such as Projeto Queto, centered in the Sampaio favela in Rio’s Zona Norte, place the emphasis on graffiti not as a finished work of art but as an ongoing collaborative engagement with the local community as well as with the buildings and streets that they inhabit.<sup>49</sup> Some critics have described graffiti as a symptom of the fragmentation of traditional notions of community. In her discussion of *pixação* in São Paulo, Teresa Caldeira argues that these practices, which she describes as “new visibilities,” express an emerging and long repressed political subjectivity that does not quite fit the mold of official political institutions or identity discourses in Brazil. By “articulating anew the profound social inequalities” that have marked urban space (in particular the construction of fortified spaces for the rich such as high-end shopping malls protected by private security guards), interventions such as *pixação* “not only give the subaltern new visibility in the city but also express new forms of political agency.”<sup>50</sup> The parallel between the posthuman ecologies that are the focus of the narrative and the displacement of human agency in textual ecology of the

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<sup>48</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003)

<sup>49</sup> See Michelle Young, “The Legalization of Street Art in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil,” *Untapped Cities*, February 13, 2012, accessed August 31, 2016. <http://untappedcities.com/2012/02/13/the-legalization-of-street-art-in-rio-de-janeiro-brazil>.

<sup>50</sup> Teresa P.R. Caldeira, “Imprinting and Moving Around: New Visibilities and Configurations of Public Space in São Paulo,” *Public Culture* 24:2 (2012), 385.

“Tito na Rua” project, produces a map of the socio-technological assemblages that have taken the place of community. These assemblages are connected at both local and global levels and are characterized by complex interaction between the material infrastructure of the city and the virtual digitally-accessible information that flows around and through it. The “new forms of political agency” to which the project gestures emerge as epiphenomena of the multiple connections that constitute these assemblages. The effect of *Zé Ninguém*’s intervention into Rio de Janeiro is not simply to lend visibility to the marginalized populations in the city. Rather, the book employs the formal specificities of graphic fiction to encourage readers to think about their role in the complex assemblages of power in the city.



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